

Amarnath Yatra Clashes With Burhan Wani Death Anniversary, Forces Anxious

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In exactly a month from now will begin the annual pilgrimage to Amarnath cave.

This year's 40-day yatra, starting from June 29, will be held in highly charged atmosphere — a month after Hizbul commander Sabzar Bhat's death and nearly a week before July 8, the day Burhan Wani was killed last year.

Incidents of clashes between stone-pelters and security forces are as frequent as ever.

The Home Secretary has himself held a meeting to review security of Amarnath Yatris. More than 27,000 personnel will be deployed to secure this year's yatra. The yatra, which last year was 48 days long, has been cut short by 8 days.

"There are equal threats from militants and stone-pelters. All threats are being taken care of," Ashok Prasad, advisor in the Home Ministry, told reporters last week.

Around 100 people have already died in the valley after Wani's encounter last July.

According to sources in the army, there are 150 foreign militants in the valley right now, and for the first time they are outnumbered by the presence of 250 local recruits. The militants have since the beginning of this year picked up the ante, as protests have intensified. But this is still not the biggest concern to the security forces in securing the Yatra.

Amarnath Yatra will begin roughly around the time when youth-led unrest in the valley will complete one full year of clashing with security forces. These protests seem to be beyond the control of any political party, militant outfit or separatist camp.

And how these mobs behave around July 8 is the biggest fear for the security forces on the ground.

"We have not received any specific input, as far as militant groups are concerned, on the Yatra being targeted as of now. But our main worry is about how these youth-led mobs will behave during the Yatra. All that's required is for one among the mob to call for attacks on the Yatris and that could lead to a serious situation," said a senior CRPF officer posted in the valley.

It is for this reason, the officer added, "that Yatra this time is being considered with greater sensitivity than it has been quite some time."

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CRPF, which already has 300 companies in the valley right now, will deploy 100 more companies to secure the Yatra. Each company has 80 soldiers.

Overall, more than 30,000 soldiers from local police, CRPF and army were deployed in last year's Amarnath Yatra.

So far no separatist outfit or militant group has opposed the yatra. The head of the moderate wing of All Parties Hurriyat Conference (APHC), Mirwaiz Umar Farooq, told News 18, that the Hurriyat is looking at Amarnath Yatra as a window of opportunity.

"There is nothing for the yatris to fear. Even at the peak of 2016 agitation not one yatri was harmed. There are no two ways about it, we welcome the yatra. But we also hope that when the yatris come to Kashmir they for themselves see the heavily militarised zone that we live in," said Mirwaiz.

He added that he hoped that “the tourists understand and tell other people about the conditions we live in every single day, and help in starting a dialogue with New Delhi. In this sense, we are looking at the upcoming Yatra with a sense of hope and as an opportunity.”

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Though there has been no opposition to the Yatra from any political camp, it is being opposed by civil society groups. Last month, a report on Yatra was released by Jammu Kashmir Coalition of Civil Society. It was titled ‘Amarnath Yatra: A Militarized Pilgrimage’ and talked about how the ever increasing size of the Yatra was creating an ecological hazard.

The report also made several political statements, such as, ‘[by conducting this Yatra] Indian State comes through clearly as a Hindu state, privileging the rights of Hindu pilgrims over pressing local environmental and human rights concerns. In Kashmir this divisive communalisation has further significance given that it is a disputed territory, and a Muslim majority region.’

Khurram Pervez, a Kashmir-based human rights activist who co-authored the report, told News 18, “Kashmiris will continue to welcome the Yatris as they always have.”

He said he saw no reason, “why the Yatra should be opposed or obstructed in any way. It is very important to the people who are connected with Kashmir’s hospitality industry. Political people have also said that the Yatra should go on. But our concerns are the ecological imbalances should be addressed. We don’t think the Yatra is an emotive issue. Last year also 4.25 lakh people turned up for the Yatra but not one was harmed in any way.”

Security officials who are making arrangements for the Yatra are banking on the fact that even during peak turmoil in the state the Yatra or the Yatris have never been attacked, except once — in 2000 when terrorists struck at the base camp of the yatra in Pahalgam, killing 32 people.

An IG-rank official in the state police said that if the Yatra is attacked this time, it will mark a significant shift in the nature of unrest in Kashmir.

“I have been here long enough to know that the Yatra has, apart from one incident, never been attacked. And even at that time we have reasons to believe that the terrorists were aiming for our men rather than the yatris. At the maximum there have been incidents of some stone pelting, for which we are prepared. I cannot rule out an attack on the Yatra, but if such a thing happens it will be something never seen before. Such an attack, if carried out, will change a lot of dynamics in the state.”

But it has been a year of unprecedented developments in Kashmir. Militants from different groups coming together in one video, more than 90 local youths joining militancy in 2016 alone, students leading protests in the valley, politicians hiding in Srinagar. All this has happened mostly since last July 8.

Which is why everyone, from security officers, to political parties to separatists and the people outside the state will keenly be observing as the first batch of Amarnath Yatris begin the annual pilgrimage this year.